Depot Town Rag

FREE 100% RAG CONTENT

SPECIAL EDITION

25th ANNIVERSARY

1976-2001

A PUBLICATION OF THE DEPOT TOWN ASSOCIATION, INC. The Caboose, 400 Market Place, Ypsilanti, Michigan 48198

Keeping our wheels firmly on the tracks

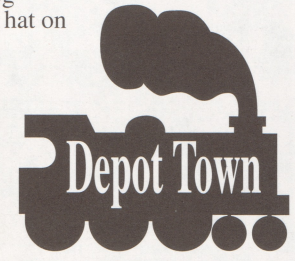
Like the fabled Twentieth Century Limited, this little commercial district hurtled down the tracks to the new millennium with a full load of nineteenth century baggage. Passengers and crew were pleased and astonished that they were able to keep the history intact while meeting the needs and expectations of the present day business climate.

Never known to be Pollyanna historians or rear-view mirror romantics, the folks who call themselves Depot Towners are realists who hold a great sense of community and neighborhoodliness. That tradition keeps the district alive today. Welcome to a celebration of the past twenty-five years of district-wide activism.

What's a Depot Towner?

A few easy steps that can help you fit in to the old neighborhood

- Act like you know everyone you meet
- Wave at the trains and even at passing cars. Down here, you won't get arrested for such open and enthusiastic behavior
- Don't be surprised when the wait staff starts bringing you what you ordered last time without even asking
- Carry on conversations in the street
- It's OK to gawk at the tops of the buildings. Unlike some, we tend to examine our built environment with great regularity
- Pick up the trash some tourists drop and mutter in a proprietary manner
- Stop and smell the flowers if you want, but pull some weeds while you're down there, too!
- Be prepared to argue either side in any argument; take on all willing participants
- Bring your dog
- Eat with your hat on
- Go fishin'
- Catch frogs
- Sit in the sun
- Tell stories about when your Grandpa worked for the railroad and used to hang out down here



DTA celebrates 25th anniversary

A *Silver Rag* edition commemorates first quarter century of neighborhood activism in Ypsilanti's historic Depot Town

When the Depot Town Association organizers first started strutting up and down East Cross and North River Streets in 1976, some radical visionaries thought it would be cool to have a little newsletter that covered the news on the block. "All the news in one block in one month" was their motto and they kept it up for twenty years. Striking fear (mirth?) into the hearts of the two local dailies, *The Depot Town Rag* lived up to its moniker: "Rag" – a newspaper put out by non-professionals.

Folks at *The Ypsilanti Press* and *The Ann Arbor News* often spoke derisively of the monthly four- or six-sider, but many on their staffs confessed to finding some of their most exciting leads in *The Rag*. Then everything changed: *The Press* folded and reappeared as an edition of *The News*. Sensing a need for more local focus, *The Ypsilanti Courier* became a reality. DTA members decided they didn't really need a newsletter any more, and *The Rag* died a dignified death after twenty years as a monthly neighborhood publication.

And look at Depot Town today! It looks just like it did when it was fresh and vital in the late nineteenth century. It worked. Everything recommended in the 1976 *Depot Town Study* came into reality long before its ten-year action plan predicted. Except for the preservation of the Thompson Block and the MCRR depot, the rest of the district was right on schedule. Some say these seedy examples serve to remind us of where we've come from while others grieve for lack of progress on those venerable and historic properties.

This specially reincarnated issue of *The Rag* highlights the successes of the past quarter century "down between the river and the railroad tracks." Welcome back to the good old days.

The Good Old Days

"They say those Historic District folks want us to go back to what we were originally."
"And what was that?"
"Weeds, mostly!"

Depot Town *IS* what America *WAS*!

What worked?

- The Old Caboose for kids of all ages
- Parades for every possible celebration
- Crossing Guard Tower at the intersection
- Calling customers by their first names
- Commemorative pavers in sidewalks
- The Ypsilanti Heritage Festival
- A town clock on the boulevard
- Live music (still on Frog Island and in the Freighthouse). Jazz, in general, was as good for Ypsi's Depot Town as it has been for New Orleans.
- Bringing Elvis back for a series of annual festivals and celebrations of loyalty
- Getting creative and painting up these old Italianate commercial buildings
- Angle parking old classic cars up and down the street with great regularity
- Vindication of the value of the Ypsilanti Historic District
- Lots of free parking
- Beer (proclaimed on Sidetrack's east sign to be proof of God's love, offered up in a tent whenever neighbors gather, memorialized by Frog Island Brewing's Stewart's Pale Ale)
- Lots of local history to swim in daily
- Still time to talk and be neighborly

What's ahead for Ypsi's old railroad district?

• In the beginning, there was just despair in Depot Town. There were motorcycle gangs, weeds taller than a five-year-old, busted up sidewalks, abandoned buildings, absentee landlords, public apathy, and the threat of being torn down.

But, in 1976, the clouds parted and rays of sunshine started to come through. Urban pioneers planted seeds of prosperity and there was the formation of the Depot Town Association. They saw what was once beautiful and decided that they would start a revival of what would become Ypsilanti's jewel.

The Association helped support merchants by bringing pedestrian traffic back to Depot Town. Property owners started to invest in Depot Town and repair their buildings. The city jumped on board and made the sidewalks and streets safer. We were on our way!

Sure, we had our internal squabbles but that was because of our passion and love for our two-block district. We watched and enjoyed the progress we were making. We planned, initiated, and began the Winter Jazz Series in the Freighthouse. We drew festivals to our area to enjoy our atmosphere of hokey, old times. We held festivals like Boomer Daze, Carp for Kids, the St. Patrick's Day Parade, the Civil War Reenactment, and now Michigan Elvisfest and the Michigan Brewer's.

The caboose arrived in Depot Town to become a focal point and a place to hold our meetings. Frog Island was cleaned up so we could play ball. The DTA raised money to build the signal tower, area kiosks, directional signs, clock tower, Market Alley, and plaques celebrating our history. People walk our streets and read personalized bricks of those who are connected to Depot Town.

We've come a very long way!

Where do we want to go in the next 25 years? We want our last two structures, the MCRR depot and the Thompson Building, to be rehabilitated so they may exude the beauty and functionality they once had. We want to become regionally known as a place for tourists to shop, wander through the museums, enjoy the eateries, walk along our river, and experience our festivals. We want to continue, in our own small way, to show future generations our past, to point out how small groups of passionate people can change and promote an area, and provide wonderful memories for those who pass through Depot Town.

I want to thank each merchant who worked in Depot Town, each property owner who invested and improved Depot Town, each friend who worked on a committee to help promote Depot Town, and the city that has supported, guided and helped us become what we are today. You've all left your thumbprint here.

The Depot Town Association is an unusual group of people! Where else would you find 25 years of continuous volunteers to keep our block moving forward? Here's to you!!

-Sandee French, co-owner Aubree's Sticks, Cady's,
president, Depot Town Association, Inc., 2001

• Southside parking behind the buildings???? Well, to be honest, that will more likely happen in the THIRD 25 years.

A beautiful and tasty restaurant in the Depot, where we have some vittles before we board the train outside the door and go onward into the world.

-Pam Hamblin, resident & volunteer

• The future of Depot Town lies right across the street (the Thompson Block). Just imagine six more commercial spaces being developed on the first floor and the upper floors developed something like they did with the old high school. The MCRR depot and the Thompson Block still hold the district's future.

–Jack Miller, Miller Motor Sales

YPSI DIXIT

Meant as a parody of the legal term, *Ypsi Dixit* was a regular column of local quotes in a nineteenth century newspaper in this town. Even today, it means "somebody in this town said it." The items on this page continue that tradition.

Elegy to a rail yard

• Lots of events have occured in Depot Town in the past twenty-five years ... some strange, some wonderful. As our editor has intoned ...whodathunkit? Take the appearance of a vintage red caboose out of a Valentine's Day snowstorm for openers. Mysterious arrangements and silent maneuvering brought our icon to Depot Town through the labyrinths of railyards all over southeastern Michigan.

Then there's the time angle parking magically appeared on Cross Street one Sunday morning ... not to be repeated (sadly).

There was an instance in which a full-grown locomotive pulling the Artrain wasn't in proper position on the team track by the FreightHouse ... so a determined band of volunteers actually pushed the engine back about 50 feet.

And we can't ignore the flickerings of light at all hours in the old caboose.

An unanswered question is - who painted the railroad switch box green? - making the railroad people very unhappy.

Can't forget the wandering blue commode stuffed with flowers that appeared in front of our storefronts and, just as quickly, disappeared. Apparently it's lost in the underground passages beneath the Market Plaza.

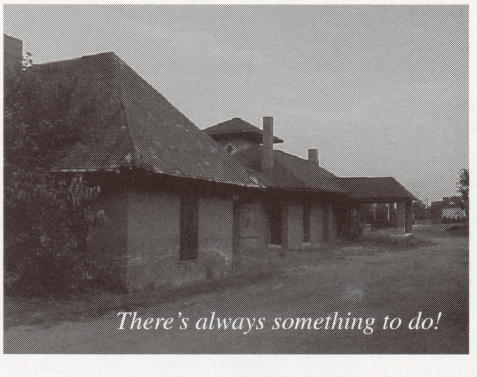
Finally, there's the tale of two streakers who drifted through a ladies' stag party in the old caboose one evening. They were dressed in hats, shoes and (partially) in bathrobes. These rogues were never identified. They fled into the snow and haven't been seen since (we think).

There's always been something afoot in Depot Town ... from winter jazz stuff in the Freighthouse to non-professional bus in Frog Island.

It's been a real trip; we won't let it end.

-Carolyn McKeever,
past president of DTA and "Ma Jazz"

• The Depot Town Association gives life to our community. Each Association member continues to make contributions that keeps Depot Town alive and living with programs like the bricks, caboose, Market Alley, the Rubber Ducky Race, and now the Elvis Fest. These activities add to our community and bring more people to visit and participate. The best way of keeping a neighborhood growing is to keep it alive with people and activities...the Depot Town Association will be the catalyst that keeps developing new programs making life continue and prosper.*-Jim Curran,*
past president DTA,
co-owner of The Cheeky Monkey



There's always something to do!

15 years ago

DTA president thanks Ypsi area for ten great years

Depot Town is proud to share the Tenth Anniversary of its neighborhood Association with the Ypsilanti community. Depot Town has again become a viable commercial and residential district because of the support we've enjoyed in Ypsilanti the last ten years.

Ypsilanti and its old railroad district are a unique and exciting combination: a beautiful, historic and hospitable city – and a dynamic group of hard-working neighbors, both developing vitality and a deserved respect throughout the area.

We want you to know how proud we are to be a part of the Ypsilanti community.

We have seen great effort on the part of the City in recent years and applaud and encourage the exciting programs and plans of the CBC, Campus Town and the Ecorse Road associations. In recent years many new neighborhood associations have risen to take responsibility for the quality of life in their own locales. Our closest residential neighbor, the Historic East Side Association, is a shining example. We look forward to continue working with the City of Ypsilanti, the newly formed Depot Town Downtown Development Authority, the Historic Depot Town Foundation, and all of our neighbors toward our common goals.

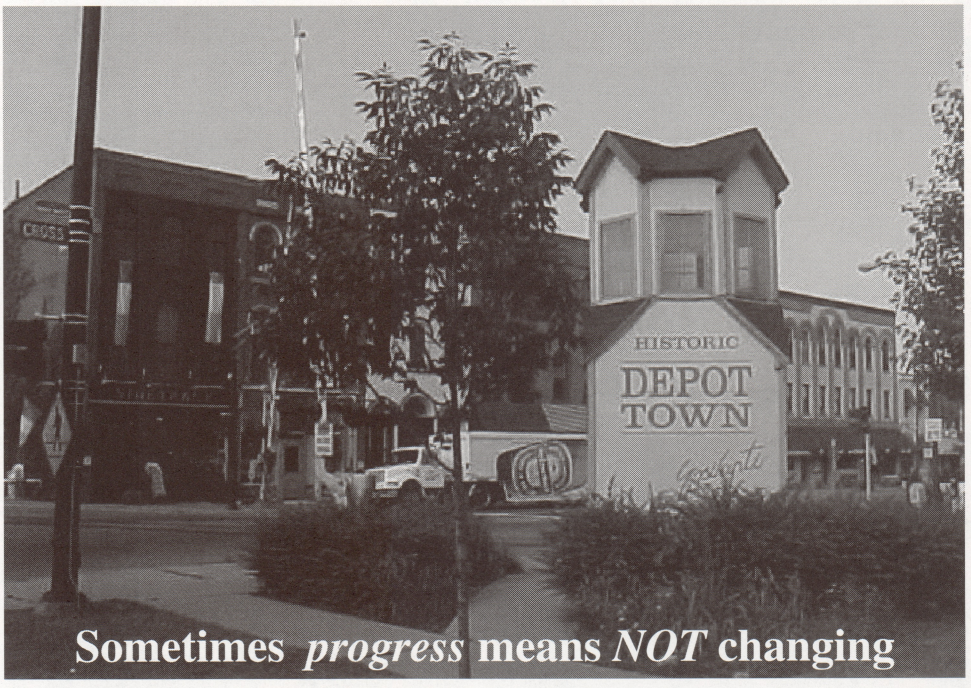
Finally, all of you have our thanks for the part you have played in bringing us so far. Our goal is to continue to merit your support in the years and decades to come. All of you are invited to join in this exciting adventure.

-Gary McKeever,
president, Depot Town Association, Inc.,
March 1985

Still available at local shops and businesses for only $15

Our Heritage:
Down by the depot in Ypsilanti
- Volume One -
by Tom Dodd & James Mann

Published by the Depot Town Association, Inc



Sometimes *progress* means *NOT* changing

They're history:

You don't have to be Benjamin Follett, Mark Norris, or Elijah McCoy to make history in this community. Even activists from the Twentieth century have made their names known down by the depot. Some are known by their names; others by their deeds.

- Nat Edmunds threw her body in front of the bulldozers to keep the old dry cleaners open for the Artrain office/gallery in 1974.
- Bill and Gerry French invented the Depot Town Association while sitting on bar stools at the Alibi
- City Manager, Steve Shutt, confided that he was bringing a "big hotel chain" (Radisson/ Mariott) to town and did we want him to put it on Frog Island? Well, at least he got the streets and sidewalks paved!
- Nancy Cudney was the new manager of Ypsilanti's new Farmers' Market and got all the apostrophes in the right places.
- In response to a state official's comment that angle parking was illegal, surly malcontents started parking in the officially unapproved one Saturday morning and the idea grew throughout the weekend
- Directional signs from the freeway told how to get to the district from the Interstate highway without winding up in Detroit or Chicago; kiosks followed
- After the City got the Freighthouse away from the railroad, locals helped to rebuild the trackside dock
- The Antique Engine Club supplied the labor to replicate the Crossing Guard Tower and David Davis engineered the project
- Everybody who felt they or their family or friends were part of all this history had their names carved in a brick and paved the sidewalks throughout the district

Same old, same old

Twenty-five years must look like much less time to the Hansen family, who have been in their print shop location since the 1930s and, with five generations in place, they plan to stay here at least another twenty-five. No sweat.

Depot Town Rag

A publication of the Depot Town Association, Inc., a nonprofit, tax-exempt corportation dedicated to preseving the unique character of the neighborhood and to the enhancement of its business climate.

Published monthly from 1976 to 1996, and then the editor defected to parts unknown and knocked out copy indiscriminately for nonprofit rags across the county. This commemorative anniversary issue is just to prove we're all still alive and publishing.

The Depot Town Association, Inc.
Sandee French, president
Tom Dodd, editor
Gary McKeever, proofreader
P.O. Box 970235
Ypsilanti, Michigan 48197

Wimpy media disclaimer:

Does it make any difference to anyone that a Big Box hardware store calls itself "*The* Home Depot?" Not any more than UM calling its self "*The* University *of* Michigan." Window decals on autos arriving from our west proclaim "UofM" on the top line and "Michigan" below - as if you couldn't figure out what the "M" stood for.

But newspapers? Well, that's different: *The New York Times, The Detroit Free Press, The Ann Arbor News, The Ypsilanti Press edition of The Ann Arbor News, The Ypsilanti Courier,* and *The Depot Town Rag*. Yeah. That's different. Right?

Reading time: 10 minutes
(unless you're working on a graduate degree somewhere in Ann Arbor and you could stretch this into a dissertation or a full-time job)

Market Alley's historical markers and commemorative pavers connect the commercial district to the Freighthouse

Stop everything!

A full 85 years after the first electric traffic signal light appeared on the corner of Euclid and 107th in Cleveland, Ohio, the City of Ypsilanti installed just such a light at the top of the hill west of Depot Town at the corner of North Huron and East Cross streets. Never known as pessimists, Depot Towners call it a "traffic light." More negative personalities refer to such aids as "stop lights," although two-thirds of the signal possibilities include "caution" and "go." With Our Town's confusing maze of one-way streets, such an amenity must surely be thought of as a "go light."

Other signal systems have been in place in the district for much longer, however. Hand-operated crossing gates at the railroad, telegraph signals up and down the track, and blinking red, green, and yellow flashers have been helping drivers of wagons, liveries, trucks, and autos to maneuver through this bustling district.

Even cell phone folks seem to be able to negotiate a U-turn down here, since it is still legal in a block designed to turn around a team of horses with a wagon. Maybe we could go back to gas lights and save energy?

But a two-way street?

Just about the time the DTA got organized, the City's planning department recommended and installed all those one-ways between the railroad track and the campus water tower. Now that the University Village merchants are organizing again and considering joining an expanded Depot Town Downtown Development Authority, they are considering turning East Cross Street into a two-way thoroughfare once more.

Imagine this: Ann Arborites would begin to find Ypsi's old railroad district by intent rather than by accident. And maybe even the students at Eastern Michigan University would start coming down to wave at the trains again.

It could happen.

Sista City props for Ypsi, Mich

Ann Arbor boasts at least six sister cities on a sign in front of Arborland Mall in a 35 mph traffic zone and some day we're going to park nearby and bring a chair over to sit down and read it. Some of their Sisters have exotic, foreign names and are difficult for Americans to spell. Even if we know one of the more-than-a-million inhabitants of Nexahualcoyoti, Mexico, most of us have to look it up every time we write them a letter. Reading phoentically does not help with our distant cousins when they write us in Ypsi (lanti), either.

To prove we're not unique, we're proposing a big sign at the Ypsilanti city limits with the following memorably-spelled sisters posted:

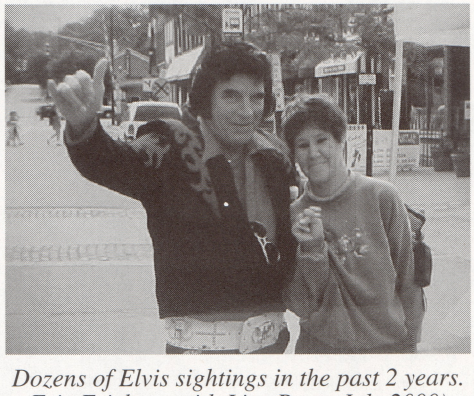
- Absarokee, Montana
- Albuquerque, NM
- West Conshohocken, PA
- Gnadenhutten, OH
- Hamtramck, MI
- Keosauqua, IO
- Oologah, OK
- Ooltewah, TX
- Penetagquishene, Ontario
- Punxsutawney, PA ("Hi, Phil!")
- Siskiyou, CA
- Tangipahoa, LA
- Unalakleet, Alaska
- Upper Musquodoboit, Nova Scotia
- Wapakoneta, OH
- Wequetequock, CT
- Weyauwega, WI
- Yamachiche, Quebec

Following such a reasonable example, Ann Arbor could start looking for towns like Wanda Woods, Betty Bog, Frieda Field, Linda Lake, Polly Prairie, Greta Glen, Connie Copse, *ad infinitum*. Pretty Plain, huh? Are we sure it wasn't supposed to be "Anna Bermish?"

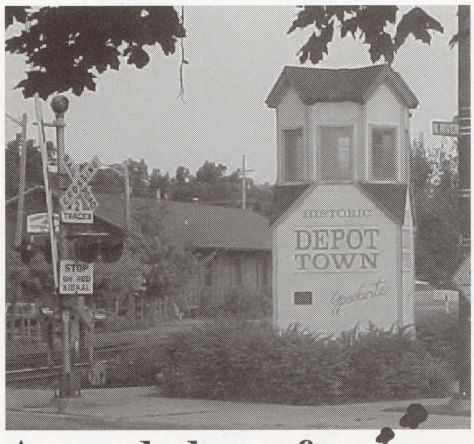
Another Market Crash?!

When the three-story east wall of Apple Annie's & Jim MacDonald's shop came down for replacement in 1986, two thirds of it fell all in one piece into what is now Market Alley. The resulting tremor was felt throughout the block. The huge iron Heidelberg press shook at Hansen's Standard Printing and the bartenders at Aubree's figured it was the district's third big train wreck from the way the building trembled.

"It was just one more rehabilitation project," says Carolyn McKeever, who was up to her ears in restoring their building.



Dozens of Elvis sightings in the past 2 years. Eric Erickson with Lisa Pope, July 2000)



A good dose of railroad reality in Ypsilanti

Never turning its back on the railroad as many communities have done, Ypsilantians revel in their gritty transportation history. *Little Engines That Could*, Artrain USA, the United States Post Office stamp train, railroad preservation societies, special excursion stops by Amtrak, and the daily passings of Conrail all enjoy the attention of regional rail fans.

Smiling through the smoke, soot, and cinders of the earlier steam locomotives, another generation stepped up and pretended to enjoy the oily and noisy diesels that followed. They kept smiling and waving and acting as if they liked the calamitous intrusions into their district.

Although culturally hyperventilated Ann Arbor enjoys TWO hidden railroads in its city limits, they are often embarrassed when tourists discover Artrain USA parked on the tracks along North Main Street (Artrain USA has stopped in Ypsi's Depot Town more times than any town in America during its 26-year history).

Making history on the block

-James Thomas Mann

According to local legend; the president of the Depot Town Association never uses a gavel to convene a meeting of the Association because it could be used as a weapon. Association meetings, especially during the early years, have been known to get a bit raucous. Some meetings, it is said, even came close to the point of violence. As far as is known, or at least admitted, no one was actually killed at a meeting; but one occasion, members expected to see blood flow. Then, after the meeting, the members would get together in the bar and become friends again.

Someone who was fairly new to the Association recently brought a couple to a meeting. The couple had been active during the early days, but had been away for some years. The members at the meeting became excited over some issue, and the exchange of words started to turned heated. The new member, thinking a fight was about to break out, began looking for a table to take shelter under. Then one of the couple turned to the other and said, " These meetings are nowhere near as bad as they use to be."

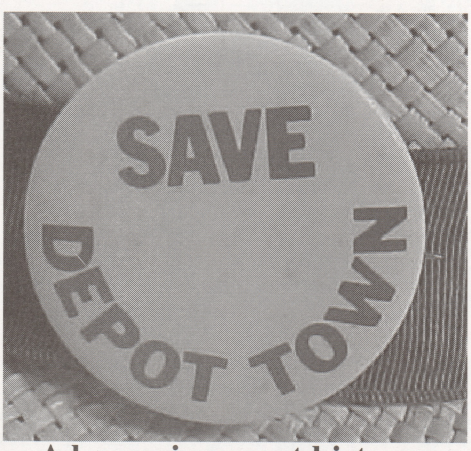
Who says this is the wrong side of the tracks?

The under-dog mentality of "the wrong side of the tracks" has worked well for this little commercial district. Following much political reality, Depot Towners hold that, if a lie is told often enough, it eventually comes true.

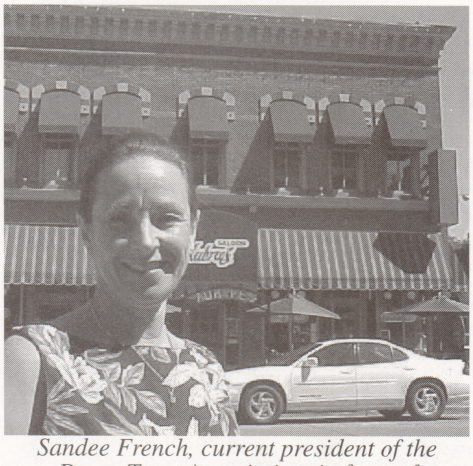
Examine the success of twenty-five years of promotional slogans down here:

"Save the Depot!"
"Ypsilanti: Cars, bars, and a few weirdos."
"You'll get more in Depot Town."
"Look at all the people gathered 'round the depot"
"Depot Town IS what America WAS"
"Tourists treated the same as home folks."
"It's the Real McCoy."
"All the news in one block in one month."
"Ypsilanti: Keeping Wayne out of Ann Arbor."
"Hang out at the old caboose; the whole darn district's on the loose!"
"Discover Depot Town: Finders Keepers!"
"Ypsi/Arbor - more than just a bowling alley."
"Join the bums, tramps, and hoboes at the annual Boomer Days."
"Depot Town: Half way between Mayberry and Lake Wobegon."
"Firmly rooted in the past . . . with a clear view forward - The Old Caboose"
"I'm just so pleeezed to see 'yall down in the neighborhood," -from Perfesser Malarkey's medicine shows.
"Depot Town: More MATURE than Briarwood. More SECURE than Arborland. More OBSCURE than downtown."
"On the right track - in Depot Town."
"Sometimes *progress* means *not* changing."

Actually, it's not a bad collection of truisms. Now let's see what this old commercial railroad district can promise us for the next twenty-five years. Where will we be in 2026? Don't miss the next monthly meeting of the Association when we start down that track to the future!



A lesson in recent history:
Before there were t-shirts, there were booster buttons. Here's the first one that appeared in Depot Town since "I Like Ike"



Sandee French, current president of the Depot Town Association, in front of one of her neighborhood businesses

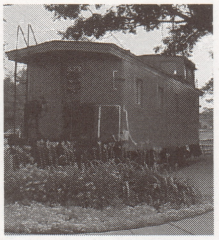
Past Presidents of the Depot Town Association, Inc.

Where are they now?

- **Gerry French** - still hangs out at brother Bill and Sandee's Cady's Restaurant
- **Beverly Shankwiler** - retired to a hunting camp in Northern Michigan
- **Tom Dodd** - defected to The Charter Township of Ypsi and then to Ann Arbor, of all places
- **Carolyn McKeever** - on Ford Lake and winters in points west to Arizona
- **Gary McKeever** - see above
- **Paul Fetters** - hiding out in private practice
- **Rex Richie**- still owns the Newell Block
- **Jacob Guter** - architect in Ferndale
- **Judi Monaghan** - living up over a store on East Cross Street
- **Dave Blackmer** - sold Miller's Ice Cream and moved to Kentucky and back again
- **Bill French** - says he's retired from Aubree's, Sticks, Cady's, Pizza Garden, etc., but we still see him in the block a lot
- **Tommy Steele** - closed The Daily Grind and A2's Applause, Applause, and now operates a chair in an Ann Arbor beauty shop. Lives on Ford Lake.
- **David French** - operates Frog Island Brewing Company and still a regular at sister Linda's Sidetrack
- **Sandy Hoag** - Austin, Texas
- **Jim Curran** - co-owner of the Cheeky Monkey
- **Sandee French** - CEO of Aubree's, Cady's, etc. Clearly still in charge.

Left to right:: Bryan French, Andy French, Sandee French, William Jefferson Clinton*, Patty French, Aubrey William French*.*
** Past presidents of DTA, USA, etc.*

"Hang out by the Old Caboose



The whole darned district's on the loose!"
- popular song of the period

The Old Caboose, once a meeting place for the fledgling DTA, outgrew its own interior and soon became the area's prime rental space for small, private parties. Along with the Queen Mary in Long Beach, CA, The Old Caboose is one of the few vehicles in the world with a legal stationary address. When locals moved it to this permanent location in the Ypsilanti rail yard, City officials were in a quandry over what to call such a piece of real estate. Finally, after the usual political deliberation and obfuscation, they decided to call it a monument. It pays no taxes, but has an address for the U.S. Postal Service.

In later years, the ancient structure was loaned to the Ypsilanti Police Department as a substation. It's been rehabilitated three times since DTA rescued the old Grand Trunk Railroad line office and has been featured in song and poetry, watercolors and oils.

DTA's Old Caboose is still a favorite with three-year-olds who just want to get up on that platform and turn that brake wheel.

Celebrating DTA's 25th year of involvement with Ypsilanti's historic Depot Town district

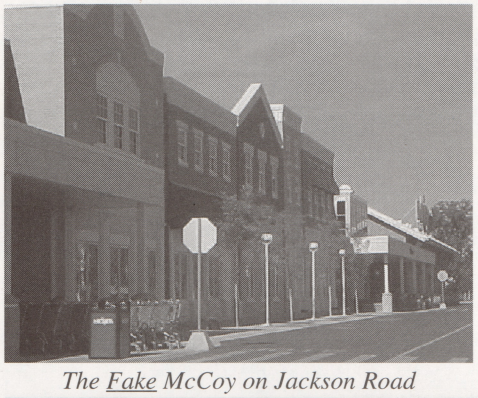
(* = present at DTA's 1976 founding)

Fantasee Lighting
Miller Motor Sales*
Ypsilanti Automotive Heritage Collection
Ypsilanti Food Co-op
Depot Town Sourdough Bakery
McMullen Architects
Utilities Instrumentation
Carver Construction
Ted's Auto Electric*
Sidetrack Bar & Grill
Vital Signs
Richard Reed's Hair Station
Enchanted Florist
Schramm's Deli & Grill
Ike's Barbershop
Cady's Restaurant
Silver Spoon Antiques II
Olde Towne Coin & Gold
Shear Genius
Creation Station Hair Salon
City Body Shop*
Esquire Interiors
My 'n' My Sisters Country Store
Teachers Shop
Ypsilanti Farmers' Market
Quinn's Essentials
Silver Spoon Antiques I
Forget-Me-Not Boutique
Apple Annie's Vintage Clothing
& James MacDonald's Antiques*
Cheeky Monkey
Serenity House
Hansen's Standard Printing*
Aubree's Saloon/Sticks*

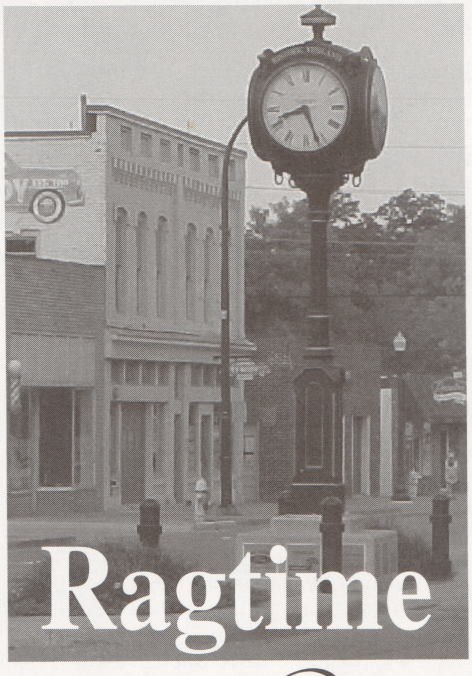
Depot Town Association's 25th Anniversary Party - Saturday, 20 October, 2001, at the Freighthouse

"Cato used to assert that wise men profited more by fools, than fools by wise wen; for that wise men avoided the faults of fools, but that fools would not imitate the good examples of wise men." *-Marcellus*, Plutarch, A.D. 46-120

The Real McCoy on East Cross Street



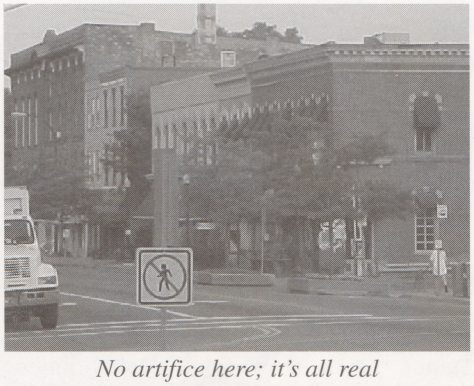
The Fake McCoy on Jackson Road



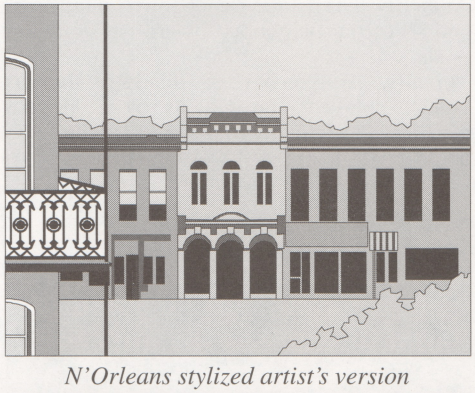
Ragtime

Happy 25th Anniversary

"I have thought some of Nature's journeymen had made men and not made them well, they imitated humanity so abominably." *- Hamlet*, William Shakespeare, 1564-1616



No artifice here; it's all real



N'Orleans stylized artist's version

Facadomy charges anticipated for Athens of the Mid-West

Appliance Depot • Bargain Depot • Burger Depot • Carpet Depot • Copy Depot • Dance Depot
Decorating Depot •Dairy Depot • Design Depot • Digital Depot • Hair Depot • Home Depot • Nail Depot
Office Depot • Party Depot • Pizza Depot • Shoe Depot • Storage Depot • Video Depot • Wallpaper Depot

If these Big Box stores opened in the new Thrifty Acres complex at Jackson/Zeeb, could they call it "Depot Town?"